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## Divorce and the Church

*"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." Mark 10:6-10 (NIV)*

With these words, Jesus announced a change in policy on divorce. In Old Testament days, a man could send his wife packing by writing out a certificate of divorce. But that custom was contrary to God's will and original intent for humankind, Jesus said. God only permitted it as a concession to the hardness of people's hearts.

This new teaching on divorce was only part of a much larger new design for human relationships. Jesus taught that the old ways of domination, revenge, hate for enemies and pride were to be superseded by servanthood, forgiveness, love of enemies, humility. Divisive class and gender discrimination was to give way to a community that was one in Christ Jesus. Marriage founded on these new terms of mutual servanthood, love, devotion, and forgiveness would be marriages in which the "two indeed become one", in which the issue of divorce really has no place.

As Christians we clearly want to uphold the "two become one" concept. We realize that when a man and woman make a lifelong commitment to love and cherish one another, they have created an arrangement of unique beauty and strength. Children born to such a couple are provided with a firm emotional base from which to grow and mature into caring adulthood.

But what do we as Christians, the church, do when marriage vows are spoken but not lived out? When two persons inhabit the same living space, sleep in the same bed, but do not nurture and care for one another? When hate, pride, domination, even violence—the old ways—replace the love and mutual service that Jesus called us to?

The church is having a difficult time knowing what to do. On the one hand, church people do not want to fall into easy acceptance of divorce. Some fear that accepting divorce in *some* cases will lead to an accepting attitude in *many* cases. The floodgates to promiscuity and irresponsibility are easily opened, they believe, and shut only with difficulty. They worry that the climbing divorce statistics are becoming a wave that will wash all marriages overboard. Today's good and justifiable reasons for divorce will become tomorrow's lack of commitment and easy-out. The Mennonite church, which has historically held itself apart from society, is additionally concerned that divorce is just another modern, secular phenomenon that the church should be especially vigilant about drifting into.

On the other hand, the church is also called to be caring and responsive to others' needs and hurts, quick to forgive and tardy to judge. Should the church encourage a brother or sister to stay in close physical contact with a spouse who is hurtful, in a relationship that is damaging and sinful, in which the marriage covenant, for all intents and purposes, has been broken? Is it not hypocrisy to call a "marriage" something which is clearly not a marriage of heart and soul in God's eyes? Should not the Christian church be the first to forgive individuals for their past mistakes and sins and allow them to build a new life for themselves?

Whatever the church's response, it should be noted that women are particularly vulnerable both to customs that make divorce very easy and to customs that make it virtually impossible.

Where divorce is very easy to obtain, as it was in Old Testament days and is today in parts of North America, divorced women stand to lose much in the way of material security. Some writers see Jesus's pronouncement against divorce as pro-feminist, as a statement against a repressive institution that left a woman without family and without property at the whim of her husband. (MacDonald). Recent research has shown that today's no-fault laws, while reducing the acrimony of the divorce proceedings, have contributed to the impoverishment of women. Lenore Weitzman, associate professor of sociology at Stanford University in California and chief researcher of a 10-year



**"Divorce is a crisis situation, but it need not be synonymous with disaster. It is, however, probably the only situation in which one might have to adjust abruptly to a new life-style without the approval and support of family and community."—Darlene Petri, in *The Hurt and Healing of Divorce***

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study of the effects of California's no-fault divorce law, discovered that after the average divorce, the man's income increased by 42 percent whereas that of the woman and her dependent children decreased by 73 percent. (Takas) In the United States, of the more than 8 million women raising children under 21 whose fathers are not living in the household, fully one-third live below the poverty level. Nearly two-thirds of families entitled to child support collect no child support at all. (Takas)

Where divorce is severely condemned and virtually impossible to obtain, however, women may be trapped in abusive situations. We are just now discovering the extent of domestic violence, even in rural Mennonite communities. (Suderman) Recent research by a doctoral candidate at the Fuller Graduate School in Oakland, Calif. has shown that conservative Protestant ministers are often reluctant to counsel women to leave an abusive relationship. (Alsdurf) To some ministers, the marriage vow has evidently become sacrosanct and preserving the marriage may take precedence over preserving the woman's well-being, and even her life. (Alsdurf)

How to find a balance? What does the Lord require of us? Is Jesus' teaching a law for all occasions, never to be abrogated, or is it a description of the ideal relationship God envisioned for humankind, a relationship that believers will want to work at obtaining and preserving? I would like to argue that Jesus' prime concern is with people—their dignity, their wholeness—not with blind adherence to religious laws. When the Pharisees chastised Jesus for healing a crippled man on the Sabbath, he replied "I ask you which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" (Luke 6:9) Jesus switched the emphasis from a specific law about Sabbath behavior to a general law: to do good and to preserve life. And he applied this general law to one individual, the crippled man. The church can do no more than follow this example. Where adherence to laws would cripple rather than heal, we must look beyond the letter of the law for the spirit of God's love in promoting good and preserving life.

Historically, Mennonites have had strict taboos against divorce and the number of divorced Mennonites has been very low compared to other denominations. (Driedger et al). This has contributed to the difficulty some congregations have experienced in relating to and accepting divorced individuals. A contributor to this issue of *Report* shares from her heart the rejection and hurt she felt from church members. In "The Big D," Esther Abee questions why non-Christians seem to be able to treat persons in the

throes of a painful divorce with greater love and charity than do some who call themselves Christians. That she and another writer chose to use pseudonyms may indicate that they still fear censure for events that happened many years ago.

Mennonite institutions, however, are also innovating in programs to help troubled marriages. Wendy MacRogers describes the Recovery of Hope program in her article, "Please Release Me." The program helped bring her marriage back from the brink of permanent damage.

Individual congregations can also help, as a group of four divorced women from Lancaster County, Pa. concluded after a session to brainstorm ways others can ease the burden of those who are divorced or going through a divorce. Their suggestions are included in the article entitled "The Church: Helping or Hurting the Divorced Woman?" ■—Emily Will

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by Esther Abee



## The Big "D"

Labeled. The bumper sticker on the car in front of me advertised in bold black-on-white letters, "I AM A CHRISTIAN."

Labeled. I feel the label emblazoned on my person in the eyes of my fellow church members. The "BIG D."  
"DIVORCED."

The "BIG D" is not a nice label. Divorce is not a nice word. And nice people surely don't do it! Reports giving statistics on divorce are negative, whether they tell the percentage of marriages that end in divorce in our country, or the impact of divorce on children, or the crumbling of societal values. And certainly when divorce happens to someone in our church family, it is bad. And I am sensitive to the fact that I added "one more" to all those statistics.

The label is only part of the experience. Divorce *is* not "nice." It hurts. It devastates people. But it happens. It happened to me. And I am a Christian.

That was 20 years ago, and it is still painful to remember. To "tell it like it was" requires me to expose my hurts and weaknesses, to share what felt ugly, and to permit myself to be vulnerable. I will tell you what was real to me, what I felt, without meaning to place any blame. Possibly if I communicate from the ashes of my experience, the toll it exacted and what I felt, someone can be touched with love and understanding for another.

Marriage vows are a covenant. The dictionary defines a covenant as "a binding and solemn agreement; to bind one's self." I understood that meaning to apply to my marriage vows. I never even imagined that those vows could be broken. Even in times of great difficulty in the marriage relationship, divorce was never an option I considered. And I was married for 21 years.

I grew up in a closely-knit community where I never knew anyone who was divorced. That only happened to other people who lived in sin and did not place their trust in God!



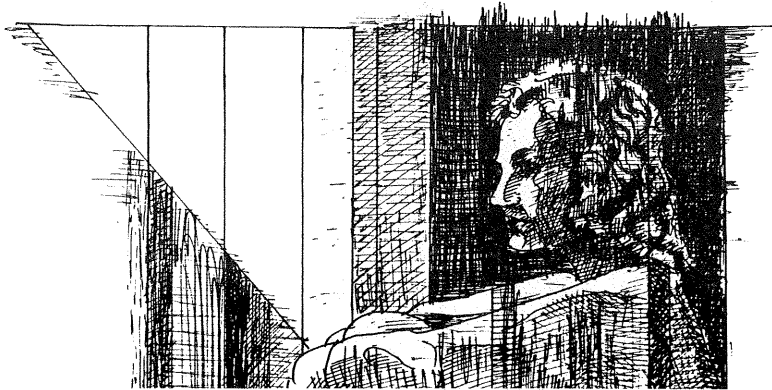
My parents were devout Christians who taught us that "the husband is the head of the house and the wife is the heart of the home." I desired that for my home.

Only weeks into my marriage there were some serious danger signals. But I was young and optimistic, and besides, I was married. I was committed. I believed that if I would be a good Christian wife, God would hear my prayers and our home would be happy and blessed, a Christian home. I believed that this was a time of testing for me, that the Lord wanted to shape me and I accepted the problems as an opportunity to grow. I especially prayed for an obedient spirit, willing to be molded and shaped to become that which God desired for me. I turned more and more to my Bible and to Christian radio programs for support. I found encouragement in these.

Children were born into our home. This brought new dimensions of responsibility as they grew older. The time came when I could no longer pretend that they were not being shaped by what they were experiencing in our home, by what was modeled for them. I struggled with the submissive wife role. It would have been so easy if I could have reasoned, "My husband is the head of our house and therefore I am not responsible." But I *felt* responsible and my knowledge made me feel guilty. Repeatedly I asked God to give me peace of mind if God wanted me to be accepting of conduct in our home which seemed sinful to me. I chided God about how easily females could have been created with a dull mind if we were meant to be totally submissive to the male. "It could have been an automatic combination in the genes," I said, "Female-dull, male-intelligent." But God did not create us that way!

I felt guilty and I continued to struggle with the question of my responsibility as a wife and mother. I remembered clearly from my youth some of the older ladies in our church who demonstrated abject submissiveness whose children grew up to live in sin. I wondered if God would ask them about their children on judgment day and if their answer, "My husband was responsible" would pass muster. I found no peace of mind trying to believe that I was not responsible. I knew that if my children became adults who lived in dishonesty and sin, I would have failed them. And so, as they became old enough, I took them to Sunday school and I attended church with them. It was difficult. Church people kept asking why my husband didn't come, why didn't I bring him. "Tell him we want him to come," they said. And I tried to teach our children obedience and Christian values and also that each of us is responsible for our own actions, each of us must choose between right and wrong.

*"When my husband and I finally separated after those seven anxious months, I was alone for the first time in my life. I have mercifully forgotten the terror that accompanied the realization of my aloneness in the universe. Marriage is a state that allows us to deny our existential aloneness." — Brenda Hunter, in Beyond Divorce.*



There were many stresses in our home, including financial stress. It became necessary for me to get a job. The stresses became worse in spite of my prayers and efforts. I remember comforting the children after particularly difficult times with, "This is probably the toughest time we will ever have. It may be better from now on. Let's believe that!"

But finally there came a time when my inner resources became depleted. I concluded that God did not hear prayers. At least not mine. I began to wonder if prayer was no more than an exercise in self-discipline. I talked to people in Sunday school about prayer, I talked to my family about it. Their answers seemed so right, but they didn't work for me. I reached a point where I said, "God, if you are there, don't let go of me. I can no longer hold onto you." I quit praying. The Bible seemed to have no help for me. I was drained—emotionally, spiritually, physically. I had a conscious desire to be alone in a small, white room with a lock on the door. There I would be safe. There would be peace. What kept me from that room was the knowledge that I would leave vulnerable children to cope with a situation which was overwhelming me. And I couldn't do that.

We had a pastor who tried to help, with great sensitivity and love. We had professional marriage counseling for a time. But nothing changed.

Our family's survival depended entirely on my earnings by now. When my paycheck became attached several times for debts my husband had incurred, we were actually without food and it became necessary for me to file for separate maintenance. This led to my husband's counterclaim for divorce. The marriage vows were broken.

Life changed. Home became peaceful, a place where we could relax, even though the children and I felt bruised, confused and full of hurt.

Outside our home I felt changes, too. The label was attached! We continued to attend the same church, but suddenly I was treated differently. I found myself wearing the "BIG D." I was dismayed. I had firmly believed that the church was where one went for support and caring when one was in need. But I remember clearly the Sunday morning when I entered the foyer and saw one of the church leaders smile in welcome across the room as he stood there with his wife. As I came by to greet them, his wife deliberately stepped directly in front of him and just looked at me, no greeting. And I quickly learned to watch where I sat. One Sunday I happened to sit next to a man. His wife, who was on his other side, moved far down the pew, leading him

away from me, no smile, no greeting. I had known them as a "friendly couple" for years.

And there was the deacon's wife who cornered me after church one Sunday and insisted that I must not keep all this burden within me, that I must trust her and let her help me. I did. Within weeks I was being asked by acquaintances about some of the things which I had confided only in her.

Two church members cared enough to come by our home. One, an elderly gentleman, brought me three books on the wrongfulness of divorce. The other, a young mother, appeared on our doorstep with a pan of cinnamon rolls. She said, "I was thinking of you and didn't know what I could do for you so I baked you these rolls." I burst into tears, overcome by the love and acceptance I felt from her. Some day I shall write a book and its title will be, "A Pan of Cinnamon Rolls." What those few rolls conveyed! What nourishment they gave! How far they went!

I continued to attend church for two reasons which gave me a feeling of worth. I wanted to be a good model for my children. And I wanted to show fellow Christians that even though I was divorced, I was still a Christian who loved the Lord and wanted to serve the Lord. But I remember facing our front door after we were ready to go to church on Sunday mornings feeling, "I can't do it. I can't open this door and go to church." Then I would deliberately concentrate on my feet and say to myself, "Just walk. First left, then right, left, right, left, right, left, right..." and I would keep thinking about my feet until we arrived at church. I'd slip in as unnoticed as possible and leave the same way.

There followed for me a time of deep searching. My prayers had been sincere. Why were they not answered? I searched my Bible again for new insights. Then one day as I read the familiar story of Jesus meeting the woman at the well, suddenly I was that woman! It was so clear to me! Jesus accepted her, and I too was acceptable and accepted. I realized that Jesus forgave me. I just needed to forgive myself! After this, church services became more meaningful to me in a very private way. I was determined that I would give love and forgiveness whether or not they were given to me. Church would be my special opportunity for growth!

I was troubled by the distinct difference in how I was treated in my church compared to my place of work. At work nothing changed because I was now divorced. I was OK, respected, cared about the same as before. At church, where I wanted to go for support and love, I now felt inadequate, not good enough, even unwanted.

**"Among the divorced, there are essentially two categories of people: those who leave marriages and those who are left. Those who leave marriages may have their guilt, but those who are left definitely have their rejection. "Who recovers first?"**  
—Brenda Hunter, in *Beyond Divorce*.

I decided that maybe I just needed a new beginning, so I changed churches. It helped. But by now I had developed a survival shield to mask the devastation I felt inside. I acted as though everything was wonderful, while inwardly I was aching, crying in my heart. No one knew the stab I felt when a conference delegate reported to the congregation that a session had dealt with the problem of "what the church should do about those among us who are divorced." I felt so guilty for causing the church to have the problem of me. And I could hardly stay there the Sunday when the sermon focused on the corruption of our society as indicated by divorce statistics. For a time I considered asking the church to remove my membership. I felt I could at least free them from the burden of me. But I was still that woman at the well and Jesus said I was OK! I wished so much that I did not need the church, but I knew that I did.

I questioned our Christian values when at work I was aware of someone from a non-christian family experiencing a divorce but still being cared for and loved by her ex-in-laws. I saw those parents reach through the severed relationship and continue to accept and love the spouse who had divorced their child. I felt so rejected by my once parents-in-law to whom I had felt so close. To them I no longer existed. And we were all Christians.

More and more I found my support and affirmation outside the church. I understood how easily self-fulfilling prophecy could apply to me. Those who rejected me in the church could say, "She isn't active in the church anymore. See the non-christian friends she has. It proves what her values really are. No wonder she got a divorce!" It would have been so easy to forsake the church.

I struggled with how I could grow stronger in my spiritual life. I did not trust anyone from my church enough to share what was within me. I know trustworthy people were there, but by now I had found safety within barriers I put up to protect myself. But the hurt needed healing, not masking. All the time, I felt so very ALONE. The aloneness was so great it felt like a cavity within me which was greater than my being. I can't describe how great it was. Inside I was crying constantly for years. And I look back and marvel at how well I masked it. No one seemed to even notice.

All that is past now. I have become less sensitive to the aloneness. There have been many good times, too. I have found some true friends in the church, couples who accept me and invite me to their get-togethers. They can't know that what they are really giving me is life. And hope. And love which communicates. I have a good job which challenges me. My children are grown with homes of their

own, beautiful young adults seeking to serve their Lord. Grandchildren give me joy.

Yet sometimes the hurt returns like a surprise chill wind when my heart's door is open, making me particularly vulnerable. When my fine son-in-law met a tragic death, leaving my daughter with very young children to care for, a sister in their church commented that it was so sad that God had to let my son-in-law suffer that way to punish me. And when my mother became terminally ill and I went to be with her, I felt the well of support and strength that can come from a community of friends who reach out in love. And I thought how this expressed God's love, and of how much it would have meant to me to have received this kind of love at a time when I experienced a different but nevertheless great hurt.

A wonderful memory from that hurtful time is remembering the several families in the church who had sons the age of my son who included him in many of their family outings and special times. He was able to share their happy times. But maybe more importantly he saw models of what a "family" might be. I know that made a difference in his life. I am forever grateful to them.

The experience of divorce takes a heavy toll of one's self-esteem. But I know now that I do have worth. I can be sensitive to others who are hurting. And there are older people who are lonely whom no one seems to touch or to hug. Everyone needs the touch of a warm hand and everyone needs to be hugged and I can do that! And I am working at being a good listener. Sometimes that is the need. And I too can bake cinnamon rolls!

I have become a "Don't tell me, show me!" Christian. I am not impressed with bumper stickers which proclaim, "I AM A CHRISTIAN." What I will notice is how the driver performs on the road. That is what makes the difference!

That is where I am today. The label communicates nothing. "BIG D." "DIVORCED." "BIG C." "CANCER." "MENNONITE." "CATHOLIC." "ANGLO." "METHODIST." "HANDICAPPED." It's not the label I may wear, but how I perform that makes all the difference. ■

**"Esther Abee" is an educator who lives in the western United States. Her pen name carries particular significance: Esther is the name of her mother, now deceased, who was very dear to her. And "Abee" was an occasional nickname when the writer was a child, formed from the initials of her first, middle and last names. Esther has three children and five grandchildren.**

• **For Further Reading**

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Hunter, Brenda. *Beyond Divorce*. Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell Co. 1978. A divorced woman recounts the events and feelings of her own divorce in the hope of offering help and comfort to others facing the pain and loneliness of divorce.

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1976. The author shares her personal story and also provides much practical advice to the divorced woman and single parent.

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by Wendy MacRogers

## Please Release Me

It's Monday night and I'm ready for bed, waiting for my husband to join me. When he arrives he is noticeably quiet. I've had this feeling that he is always off on his own little island lately. He has been away late, a lot too, but he has been very busy in his new position. I need to be held tonight but he is so distant and doesn't seem the least bit interested in me. What's wrong? Then I hear the words that cut so deeply into my heart that I feel I will surely die.

"I must leave. I can't stay here any longer."

He wants to go yet that night but in desperation and panic, I convince him to stay. A long painful night follows and what little sleep I do manage to get is broken by the sound of our clock radio playing, "Please Release Me Let Me Go."

I don't want to know the answer but do manage to say to Ron, "That's what you want, isn't it?"

Without hesitation the word I never wanted to hear is spoken.

"Yes."

Another blow! Ron is dead serious. Emotional pain, more than I can bear. This can't be happening to me, to us.

The next few days with a counselor unveil a multitude of feelings and emotions I never knew existed. Revelations of the recent past now explain the hours of silence, late nights away from home, disinterest in our family, moodiness, anger, depression and his need to be alone. Someone else was filling his moments and taking him away from me. The signs were there hiding in the shadows of busy schedules and masked by complacent thoughts of the "foreverness" that I assumed our marriage would be. I felt that we could work it out until he told me how much he really loved "her" and not me. He said he could not continue wearing a mask to protect my feelings from being hurt.

I held up until thoughts of the future flooded my mind. What would this mean to our daughters? We wouldn't even allow them to watch *General Hospital*. How could we ever celebrate birthdays, graduations, weddings? We had always been a family who looked for reasons to celebrate. Now life seemed to end for me.

Ron continued to indicate that our life together had been and was a terrible mistake and one that could no longer be pretended. It hurt me so badly when Ron told me that he had always pretended happiness and that little in our lives together really meant anything to him. I couldn't believe that all those happy times together meant nothing—our college years, our vacations, the births of our daughters, cards and flowers. He even remembered our anniversary every year. Now, "nothing." He said he was sorry but he couldn't continue this charade any longer.

The remainder of the week brought sleepless nights and depressing days. I had no appetite and lost 10 pounds in five days. Although I continued to work and tried to relate to our girls, there was a heavy feeling on my chest and a tightness in my throat. I was on edge constantly and frightened of the future which threatened to vaporize at any moment.

One last ditch effort was arranged by our counselor to make or break our future together. Ron agreed to go to Kansas with me to attend a Recovery of Hope program designed for troubled marriages. I found out later that he agreed only because he overheard me say that I could accept this turn of events better if he would at least try to work things out. He was going only to satisfy my need to try and felt that it would be better if I were with people who could help me with the eventual divorce.

Before leaving I called several close friends from our Sunday school class. On initial contact they asked if we were packed for Florida. When I responded with no, that we were on our way to a marriage clinic in Kansas, they wondered what on earth for. Our parents were stunned but managed to pray for us. None of our immediate friends could have guessed that this was happening to us. Without great detail given them they promised their prayers and thoughts.

That Friday morning, just four days after Ron's proclamation, we were on a plane heading west to Kansas instead of south to Florida on a previously planned family vacation. Seventeen years of marriage were hanging in the balance on a trip to Kansas. Why had this happened to us? What was our future, my future?



families in crisis situations. Many of the illustrations come from the authors' work as counselors to troubled marriages.

Williams, Pat. *Rekindled*. Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell Co. 1985. The story of a troubled marriage that was rekindled.



"But why was God seemingly so far away during those seven months of marital agony and the subsequent time of deep grieving?...In truth, God was there, inhabiting the hours with me." —Brenda Hunter, in *Beyond Divorce*.

Saturday morning in Kansas we listened to the stories of three very troubled marriages which were reconciled. As we listened, I had problems relating our lives with those giving their story. It was not what I had in mind as far as a method for turning our marriage around. I knew that Ron was skeptical anyway and probably not ready to hear anything about reconciliation in the manner presented. I felt let down at the thought that he was being turned off completely because of what we were hearing. I felt so alone. I was among strangers and a thousand miles from home and family. Why did this all have to happen to us? Even with these feelings I still hoped that something there could make the difference for us. I had not completely given up. We were asked to answer some questions about our marriage and after reading Ron's written goal to end the marriage *now*, my hope started to dwindle. I felt utter disbelief at hearing his intentions put so coldly. Ron remained unmoved and determined.

That following Sunday morning in Kansas I awoke, feeling a deep rejection and a sharp sense of loss. I know now that I had actually given up. It was over. I realized that I could not live with Ron knowing that his heart was not with me.

I knew we had to do something but didn't know what. I got up and went to the kitchen where I found a pot of coffee, two mugs and a bowl of fruit, along with two handwritten notes and a church bulletin. One note was an invitation to attend our host couple's church. The other was also an invitation to have Sunday dinner with them. Although I didn't feel like going to church, I knew that we couldn't remain there. When I asked Ron to get out of bed, I was met with strong, verbal opposition.

"You can't tell me what to do!" he said.

My first feelings of anger emerged. I literally pulled him out of bed.

Ron knew I was angry because after his statement, I threw a pillow at him. It may as well have been the refrigerator. Ron knew that I wasn't one who ever yelled at anyone let alone throw things. This gesture was definitely one which displayed uncommon anger. He was up after a hard physical and verbal pull! We would be going to church.

At the kitchen table Ron read the notes and saw the church bulletin which immediately meant "set-up" to him. He quickly looked at the sermon title in the bulletin and then searched for a Bible so that he could prepare a defense strategy ahead of time. The sermon was entitled "Proposal

at the Threshing Floor," based on Ruth, chapter 3. He read the entire chapter but had trouble relating it to a brainwashing maneuver. He read chapters 1, 2 and 4 just in case he was missing something. He still wasn't sure how this could be a threat to him but felt better having done a little studying beforehand.

We arrived at the church. An usher seated us halfway up on the center aisle. It really wasn't at a location we would have chosen under the circumstances but we didn't feel in a protesting mood.

The hymns that were selected that morning were, "Marvelous Grace of our Loving Lord" and "Oh Lord My God." We had always enjoyed singing but this time there was no singing for us.

The sermon began and I could tell that Ron was becoming uncomfortable as ideas were brought out about Ruth, chapter 3, which seemed incredibly in line with our feelings at that time.

I will let Ron tell the next part of the story in his own words:

*"I was beginning to feel that I was going to lose my composure any minute. Then I remembered that I had just what I needed right there with me. Before leaving for Kansas I had been given a special yellow daisy which I placed in my wallet as a promise of my return. I removed the flower from my billfold and held it tightly in my hand. It represented everything that I would have to give up should I succumb to this pressure. I was strengthened by the thought and felt better, but only for a moment. The service ended what seemed to be, abruptly. The minister moved to the back of the church where he gave the benediction. As people began to move out into the aisle the lady seated next to us wanted to visit. Her warm greetings were met with mixed feelings and my need to get away! Grabbing Wendy's hand, I stepped out into the center aisle but instead of leaving I was suddenly being drawn toward the front of the church! Wendy, not knowing what was happening, held on as we moved in the opposite direction of everyone else.*

*"As we approached the communion table at the front of the church, my eyes were drawn to the open Bible and flower arrangement placed upon a pure white cloth covering the table. I stopped. The voice I heard in my head was unmistakable!*

*'This is too much for you to carry. Put it here and I'll take care of it.'*

## • What is Recovery of Hope?

Recovery of Hope is an intervention program for marriages in crisis. It began in 1980 when two couples involved in Marriage Encounter leadership, Sheldon and Lillian Louthan and Floyd and Nelda Coleman, observed that some people cannot take advantage of Marriage Encounter because of the high level of stress in their marriages. Such couples needed a shorter program with

more intense professional intervention. In 1982, Sheldon Louthan joined the staff of Prairie View in Wichita, Kan., a private but church-related psychiatric facility. Prairie View has since developed Recovery of Hope for local and national use. An affiliate program at Philhaven in Mt. Gretna, Pa. was begun in October 1985.

Recovery of Hope relies on a mixture of group support and professional counseling. The program begins on a Saturday

morning with a three-hour session in which a team of three couples share their experiences of disillusionment and the events and insights that led them out of their impasse to hope and eventual reconciliation. After supportive group sessions, the troubled couple moves into private counseling and decides to either proceed with their previous plans for divorce or to develop a plan of reconciliation that would postpone divorce for three to six months.

Administrators of the Recovery of Hope program describe it as pro-marriage but primarily pro-health. The emphasis is on aiding couples to come to their own decisions. The majority of couples decide to revive their marital relationship, but some choose to acknowledge the death of their marriage. These are assisted in making plans to end the marriage in a humane way.

Recovery of Hope has been quite successful in

*"I found myself reaching out. Placing my hand over the table I released the daisy onto the white cloth. I recall touching it one last time, before turning away.*

*"I pulled Wendy across the room and looking up, we saw the sign on the door marked 'Prayer Room.' The room was empty but when we entered we found ourselves in the midst of an awakening in our lives. I saw Wendy in a new way. Through an outpouring of emotion and tears, tons of guilt and despair and darkness were washed away. God's forgiveness and Wendy's forgiveness filled the room. The ability to forgive and to be forgiven brought us back to each other. God's presence was deeply felt as we held each other. I remember the blackboard there and how I wrote the words, 'I want you!' Wendy melted. I don't know how long we were there holding each other and praying out loud but when we opened the door we saw that everyone had gone. We walked out of that church and into the brightest sunshine I can ever remember. We and our marriage had been reborn."*

That following week at Recovery of Hope, contrary to our previous negative feelings on Saturday, was very positive and important as we worked at our recovery plan with our counselors. They helped us to see what drove us apart and what it would take in order to deal with the difficult times that could come along. We rediscovered ourselves and for the first time started to experience what *real* love was all about. We have been seeing so many new and exciting things about each other because we have learned to give more than we expect to receive. We are learning how to reveal feelings to each other without conveying resistance or rejection. And because we can now say no honestly and freely, we find it so much easier to want to say yes and still be ourselves. Mind-reading has been replaced by honest communication. We have become much more in tune with each other's needs.

In the beginning we had "fallen in love." Seventeen years later Ron experienced "falling out of love." We realize now that selfish reasoning and a lack of deep communication drove a wedge between us that created the trap which almost destroyed our marriage. With the help of God and a caring group of people, we made new choices. We made the decision to work at "really being married" not just "wed." Looking back I shudder to think just how terrible it would have been to have lost all of the history which we had built together and more importantly the beautiful future we see unfolding before us. Our children have seen it and have learned from it, too. Our marriage has become exciting again and our family is together.

I know that Ron and I each experienced a miracle. It was a miracle that we could give and receive forgiveness so quickly and completely, something I know would have been difficult had God not spoken to me also.

We are indeed two changed people and a changed family. We now realize what is required in order to continue growing in our marriage. We know that the fulfillment of



our lives together will not come about by chance and that marriage as a living thing requires commitment, attention, loving care and God. Love really is more than just a feeling. It's a decision!

We were given a clear window of life which shattered through neglect and carelessness. God took the pieces and turned them into a puzzle which he then put together, piece by piece, to form a miracle for us. ■

**"Wendy MacRogers" and her husband "Ron" live in Pennsylvania. They are active in Recovery of Hope, serving on the advisory board and as resource persons to other couples with troubled marriages. Their noms de plume are assembled from the names of fast food restaurants where they spent long hours in discussion, helping God fit back together the pieces of their marriage.**



resuscitating dying marriage relationships. Eighty-five percent of those arriving at the program state that they expect to divorce. Two-thirds of those who participate, however, do make recovery plans. Of these, at least half describe their marriages as better two years after their participation in Recovery of Hope. The Recovery of Hope program can be completed over an extended period of time, from six to 12 months, for couples living

within commuting distance of either Wichita or Mt. Gretna. An intensive week-long model is available for couples living in other parts of the country. It requires transportation to Wichita or Mt. Gretna, and lodging is provided at a volunteer host home.

Recovery of Hope is now creating a national network of approved affiliated programs. Interest has been expressed from mental health centers in

Elkhart, Ind.; Sellersville, Pa.; Reedley, Calif.; and Wasco, Calif. As yet, no Canadian center has initiated an affiliated program. Periodic seminars are being held to train interested parties in developing and operating a Recovery of Hope program. A leadership training seminar is tentatively planned for September 19, 1986 in Wichita.

More information about the Recovery of Hope program can

be obtained from Steve Wilke, Ph.D., 337 North Waco, Wichita, Kansas 67202; (316) 265-8872. ■

by Linda Boulton, Mary Ellen Hadaway,  
Susanne Horst and Mary Martin

## The Church: Helping or Hurting the Divorced Woman?

This article is written from the shared experiences of several divorced women who recently got together and, over lemonade and popcorn, discussed our experiences with divorce and the church. Each of us had our own particular story and we found that the church related to us in many different ways, depending on our unique situation. In some ways we were each helped by the church and in other ways we were hurt.

Although the divorced woman experiences similar grief and deals with some of the same problems a widow does, the church can handle the loss of a spouse by death much easier than by divorce. The widow gets much more visible support from the church than does the divorced woman. Generally, people don't know how to relate to the divorced woman and they may ignore her due to their discomfort.

Some churches still treat divorced people as second-class citizens. They are not eligible to teach Sunday school classes or serve on certain committees. Socially, they are excluded from Sunday dinner invitations.

Quite often a woman going through a divorce will need to leave her church because of the memories and the congregation's inability to face the issue and deal with it. If both partners attend the church, it often becomes impossible for them to continue doing so after the divorce. Either one of them or both of them will leave. If she so desires it, a woman can usually find a church where she and her family will be accepted in the fellowship of the congregation.

The church is learning to distinguish between accepting a divorced person and accepting divorce. The church can

stress the value of commitment and the marriage sacrament and still support someone whose marriage has failed. By accepting such individuals, the church can help them to heal and to realize there is forgiveness for past mistakes and for the marriage breakdown. Increasing numbers of congregations are offering resources to strengthen marriages. Support groups, marriage enrichment seminars and confidential evaluation forms which pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of a family relationship can all help prevent divorce.

Among the useful assistance lent by churches, one woman spoke of a Sunday school class dealing with the needs and behaviors of preschool children. She recognized that her child's behavior was normal and not the result of the home situation. Church members can offer to help with the repairs and upkeep of a house. They can assist with childcare so a single mother can have some time to herself. They can include the divorced woman in family and social activities without making her feel like a "fifth wheel." Finally and perhaps the most important thing someone can do for a woman going through a divorce is to be a good listener. This may be difficult; close friends may bear the brunt of anger and resentment.

The church can and does help the divorced woman in many ways. We can't expect the church to take all the initiative, however. We each need to assume responsibility for our own well-being.

We found the experience of divorce to be a time of real soul-searching for most of us, and we learned that our faith could be deepened even through this painful experience. Jesus Christ can become a very close friend and we can share our deepest thoughts with him, knowing he understands and will never break our trust. This is especially important after trust has been broken by the person closest to us.

It has been said that what counts is not what happens to us but what we do about it. The church has come a long way in recognizing and dealing with divorce in a human, forgiving way. We are all trying to find our way and even through the experience of divorce, we can become better people. ■

The writers have each been divorced from between five and 15 years, and all except Mary Martin still have children at home. They learned to know one another through an ecumenical singles group that was co-founded by Mary Martin. All four women attend the Akron (Pa.) Mennonite Church.

**Katherine Lue**, an evangelist at Mei-Lun Church in Hualien, Taiwan spent January in Elkhart, Ind. where she studied during the interterm at AMBS. The General Conference Women in Mission helped subsidize her study.

Seven women were among the 30 students graduating from Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary of Fresno, Calif. this

spring. They include **Mary Therese Breuning**, **Marlene Enns**, **Clare Ann Heffelbower**, **Ruth Klassen**, **Wendy Kroeker**, **Naomi Klassen Krause** and **Eiko Yamagishi**.

**Audrey Mierau** became pastor of Harrow (Ont.) United Mennonite Church in May. She was a student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Elkhart, Ind.

The congregation of College Mennonite Church of Goshen, Ind. recognized two women as ordained in March. **Rachel Fisher** and **Nancy Kauffmann** are two of three women on the church's five-member ministerial team. Other members include **Philip Clemens**, **Rosemary Gunden Widmer** and **Merlin Becker-Hoover**.

The congregation of Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba celebrated the ordination of **Jessie Kehler** on June 22. **Jessie** has served as coordinator of the congregation as well as a volunteer chaplain for the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba.

## Letters

Thank you for a super issue, *Report* No. 65 (on women, men and housework.) It was most meaningful. Please pass on my appreciation to Mildred Dyck, Winnipeg. What an accomplishment to investigate and compile such a range of situations! Thank you, Mildred. I passed on the whole issue to a Mennonite friend in West Virginia far from Mennonite congregations who has married children who model much household sharing. They want to keep in touch with Mennonite happenings, too.

I can identify most closely with Irene Penner's situation. Thank her for saying many things I agree with most heartily and feel deeply about. God bless her in her ministry.

Thank you for each issue. Pertinent themes. I can always think of several persons I want to pass them on to or subscribe for. God Bless,

—*Miriam Housman, Lancaster, Pa.*

I have been getting *Report* for some time. I have (not recently) changed both name and address but at this time I prefer to let the subscription drop because my husband and I plan to return to the United States in several months, and we don't know yet what the next address will be.

Actually, I should say that the articles in some of the "recent" issues (I receive them about 10 months late) have been—I could say—"over my head." The women I rub shoulders with every day have as priorities will I be able to feed my family today? Do I have enough money to pay my bill at the maternity when I have my baby in the next week or so? Will the soldiers in the nearby camp confiscate our goats because someone in our village died? Those are our concerns. So when I received the May-June 1985 issue (on women's development) with its "theorizing" on socialization and gender identity, I simply could not relate. The articles had absolutely nothing to do with the world I live in. I could say more, but its time to feed the rabbits and start the supper fire. Yours, for Third World women,

—*Linda Kroeker Tshimika, Kinshasa, Zaire.*

I thought you'd like to know what we did with the article on Cats, Women and Dignity. (In *Report* No. 64, on pornography)

It came the day before we were to meet with three cabinet ministers on equality rights.

We ended the pornography section of our presentation by giving them the article, saying, "We brought you this article to show you that in our society cats have more protection than women."

Thanks for a well researched, timely issue. Yours in Christ,

—*Donna Stewart, chair, Vancouver Coalition Against Pornography, North Vancouver, British Columbia.*

Your Jan.-Feb 1986 *Report* No. 64 is of a most pertinent issue to women. In fact, I believe the issue of violence against women may be our most critical one of the 80's.

For many years I've enjoyed your wonderful Christian networking and as a United Methodist, I'm enclosing a check to help cover the cost of your important ministry. In sisterhood and peace,

—*Virginia B. Taylor, Boston, Ky.*

Through the years I have received the Women's Concerns Report. I have alternated between "mad and glad" responses as my consciousness has been raised on various new and controversial ideas and views of current affairs. I want to thank you for the Jan.-Feb. 1986 issue culminating years of fearful, "Can this other view be true" study on "Women, Pornography and Violence."

Perhaps I am only personally responding today because I found out after years of suffering that this has been a very real problem in my immediate family. My husband is only beginning to try to understand his behavior—linked, as mentioned in the paper to "a defective belief system."

It was also true in our family that a "crisis event"—of serious sexual abuse—twice caused short-term and eventually long-term change.

My husband *read* the latest issue of the *Report* and is still

The World Evangelical Fellowship has formed a *Commission on Women's Concerns*. MCC Committee on Women's Concerns staffperson Peggy Regehr termed the development "a breakthrough."

The Long Island Diocese of the Episcopal Church has *blocked the ordination of two women* for more than a year, a move which runs contrary to current practice in the denomination. A majority of the diocesan standing committee has abstained from voting for the ordination of Anne Lyndall and Noreen Mooney, thereby preventing their ordination without voting against it.

According to the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, between 32 and 92 percent of women questioned in a survey of 10 African countries had *never heard of a single modern method of contraception*.

The *first ever Conference of Women Writers of the Americas* took place in early June in Trinidad and Tobago. Theme of the conference, organized by women's studies departments of the Regional University of the West Indies, was "consciousness, commitment and creativity."

in a state of retraining his belief system towards women. I don't pretend to know all the causes and effects on women and violence but a recent suggestion that childrearing women are the teachers of young boys, who in turn eventually perpetrate the "submission act" on women when they marry, may have to change before their sons will know how to.

In other words, I sense that my husband retains a sort of hate/revenge against the way his mother treated him, who in turn may have been mistreated by her father. So what have I, a wife and mother not treated as an equal by my husband, done to *my* sons?

The only response to your paper then that concerns me is that the second phase after acknowledging the whole issue of women and violence is for women to learn how to refuse the violence done in order not to perpetrate it on someone else. It's one thing to acknowledge the male's role in what needs to be corrected but sometimes an equally difficult thing is for a female victim not to become a victimizer in turn—the oppressed becoming oppressor. May God continue to help us *all*. Again, thank you.

—A Canadian reader

My husband recently returned from a meeting with Mennonites in Wichita, Kan. He brought home three issues of your *Report*. *They are all excellent*—so thoughtful and thought-provoking. I'd love to see No. 61 on Women's Development.

Though we are not Mennonites, we feel a deep affinity and connection with you. We give thanks for the good gifts you offer the church and world!

—Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, Bangor, Maine.

This letter is being written to let you know of my appreciation for *Women's Concerns Report*, especially March-April, issue No. 65 (on housework).

As a physician and mother of two small children, I was relieved to hear that other families are coping with housework much the way we do.

My husband and I believe strongly that our time should be given over to rearing children, not to keeping an immaculately clean house. We share the housework and

hire a person to do some cleaning on Saturdays. This allows quality family time that wouldn't otherwise be realized in quite the same way.

Still, lots of things need to be done during the week and I never *assume* that I'm more responsible than my husband, unless I'm working less than he.

Our lives are full and rich and happy. It's a pleasure to read your publication. Here's a small contribution to aid your (my) cause.

—Janet Friesen Regier, Evanston, Ill.

## News and Verbs

Tina Block Ediger is one of the keynote speakers for the 84th annual sessions of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada being held in Waterloo July 3-8.

The executive committee of MCC Canada recently approved a resolution encouraging Mennonite and Brethren in Christ conferences to "consider a more balanced involvement of men and women" when appointing representatives to MCC Canada membership meetings.

Lively discussion on the subject at the March meetings developed partly in response to a recent issue of *Report* (No. 63) which demonstrated that women represent well over half of MCC volunteer workers and nearly half of overseas leadership staff but only a tiny percentage of North American administrators and board members.

Pam Beverage has resigned as associate director of Choice Books to undertake graduate studies in counseling education at the University of Virginia.

Ruth Stoltzfus Jost was a keynote speaker at the April U.S. Peace Section Assembly in Wichita, Kan. A lawyer from Columbus, Ohio, she spoke on "The Sanctuary Movement: Who's Breaking the Law?"

• **Committee on Women's Concerns Announcements**

The MCC Task Force on Domestic Violence is compiling a list of people with expertise in dealing with domestic violence or who have been personally involved in such situations. The task force has recently been formed to explore the possibilities and dangers of using mediation for abuse victims, as well as to educate the church community about the nature and extent of domestic

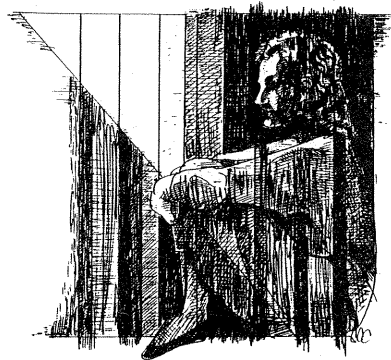
violence.

Persons willing to share expertise and experiences should write to Melita Rempel, 11-575 Ridout St. N. London, Ont. N6A 2R2 or phone (519)434-8209.

Upcoming issues of Report will deal with feminist women in the Mennonite church (those who choose to leave the church and

those who choose to stay and work for change), women in active resistance to militarism, women and advertising, and women and counseling. Readers' suggestions regarding the shaping of these topics are always welcome.

Illustrations in this issue are by Cathy C. Coon of Newton, Kan. Please do not reproduce without her permission.



Olive M. Kuhns, assistant professor of nursing at Eastern Mennonite College, retired this year after 16 years in the nursing department.

Lois Edmund has been appointed an assistant professor in practical theology at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg. She holds a doctorate in clinical psychology from the Rosemead Graduate School of Professional Psychology, Calif., and is a member of Home Street Mennonite Church in Winnipeg.

Victoria Neufeldt, member of the Toronto United Mennonite Church, has been appointed editor-in-chief for Websters New World Collegiate Dictionary, third College Edition. She is a lexicographer who earned a PhD. at the University of Toronto.

Elaine Moyer was appointed assistant principal of Christopher Dock Mennonite High School. She has been a faculty member there since 1983 and a doctoral student in educational administration at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pa. She served previously on the Bluffton (Ohio) College faculty.

A six-foot-long cast bronze rhinoceros delights children at the Fresno (Calif.) Zoo. Mennonite sculptor Margaret Hudson fashioned the rhinoceros, and was recently commissioned to do a hippo, which should be ready to join its cousin by next spring. Hudson operates Earth Arts, a retail and wholesale clay sculpture business in Reedley and Fresno.

Ruth Ann Gardner has been named registrar of Associate Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Elkhart, Ind. In the past, she has served as acting registrar at Goshen College, and as a campus pastor. She has also co-owned a computer training firm.

The eighth Hispanic Mennonite Women's Conference was held May 29 to June 1 at Wheaton (Ill.) College. Elizabeth Soto of the Mennonite Board of Missions served as keynote speaker, with music by Mary Bustos, Belinda Garcia, Anna Carvillo and a group called Genesis.

Bev Neufeld, 18-year-old daughter of Henry and Tena Neufeld, worked for a year with her parents at the Phanat Nikhom Refugee Camp in Thailand before returning to school in Manitoba.

Irene Loewen is the first woman to be hired as a full-time faculty at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, Calif. She is an assistant professor in the Pastoral Counseling Program.

Miriam Housman of Lancaster, Pa. has been elected president of Eastern Mennonite College Alumni Association.

REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in Report do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee

on Women's Concerns.

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